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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000360

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/PB AND SA/PD

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#) [BGD](#)

SUBJECT: ANOTHER LETHAL ATTACK ON THE AWAMI LEAGUE

REF: 01/27/05 ENGELKEN-MCCULLOUGH E-MAIL

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reasons para 1.5 b.

[11.](#) (C) Summary. The January 27 attack that killed former Awami League finance minister Kibria and at least three other party activists is the latest in a series of unsolved assaults on opposition leaders. There are reports of scattered AL protests, mainly in the area of the attack. It is unclear if the AL's upcoming national strike will be more effective or violent than prior efforts to force the BDG to resign. See paras 8 and 9 for suggested press guidance and points for a S-PM Zia phone call (ref). End Summary.

[12.](#) (U) On January 27, a grenade attack killed MP and former AL finance minister Shah A.M.S. Kibria at an Awami League (AL) rally with constituents near his hometown in the Sylhet division of northeast Bangladesh, according to press reports, AL officials, and local contacts. At least three other AL activists, including Kibria's nephew, were killed, and approximately 70 persons were wounded. A general strike is in effect in the area of the attack. The AL has announced a three-day nationwide strike for January 29-31.

Reaction

[13.](#) (SBU) On January 28, AL activists have stopped and are detaining a passenger train from Sylhet. Amid rising tensions, scores of buses and trucks have reportedly been stopped from entering the area. There have been several protest rallies elsewhere in Sylhet district, including one near the municipal headquarters in Sylhet city which the mayor, from the Awami League, is expected to address shortly. In Dhaka, after Friday prayers, presumed AL activists set on fire a BNP branch office in old Dhaka. As of 1700 local, there are no reports of injuries from any of the incidents.

[14.](#) (SBU) Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, President Iajuddin Ahmed, and BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuyian have issued statements condemning the attack and promising to bring the perpetrators to justice. Bhuyian, the BNP's unofficial conciliator, characterized the attack as an "act against humanity." (Note: Based on previous attacks, BNP leaders in a few days will allege the AL itself carried out the attack, perhaps noting, in this case, the well-known AL splits in Sylhet.) From the AL side, on a private satellite television channel, MP Tofail Ahmed has already blamed the BDG for the attack. AL president Sheikh Hasina and the BNP's Bhuyian are expected to hold press conferences later today. Hasina will likely attribute the attack to BNP/Jamaat Islami members and demand the BDG's immediate resignation.

[15.](#) (C) On January 28, British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury and EC Ambassador Esko Kentrschynskyj told DCM that last night's attack was even more serious than the August 21 attack on the AL leadership in Dhaka. Kibria, they noted, was a senior AL leader and an outspoken critic of Islamists. Chowdhury added he has recommended that Foreign Secretary Straw call Zia to condemn the attack and, perhaps, say her government's credibility is on the line. The British DCM later called DCM to inform her that the EU chiefs of mission had met and decided to visit the Kibria family tonight, demarche the MFA and visit Sheikh Hasina on January 30, and move forward on a strong press statement.

Comment

[16.](#) (C) The 73-year-old Kibria was a party elder whose international stature and experience brought much-needed gravitas to the AL leadership. Despite declining health, he was effectively the AL's shadow finance minister. The August 21 attack had the reckless but conceivable political logic of decapitating and perhaps destroying the Awami League. The January 27 attack, however, is particularly disturbing because it seems to represent a broader political terrorism designed to intimidate and stifle opposition. The attack underscores the consequences of failing to solve prior high-profile attacks on the opposition. After the assassination of MP Ahsanullah Master in June and the August 21 attack, the AL used strikes to spearhead pressure on the BDG to resign on the grounds it had failed to provide security for the country. Those efforts never gained

traction, and it is unclear if this time the AL will do any better.

17. (C) This time, however, the potential for violence and prolonged confrontation may be growing. AL hard-liners argue that the AL's relative restraint in the past has failed as a political tactic and as a deterrent to future attacks. Moreover, the AL is floundering as an effective opposition and seems to be able to focus and take the initiative only after it has been victimized by high-level attacks. AL frustration and insecurity could promote a more aggressive approach. End Comment.

Suggested Press Guidance

18. (U) Begin draft:

We strongly condemn the January 27 attack in northeastern Bangladesh that took the lives of former finance minister Shah A.M.S. Kibria and at least three other Awami League activists, and injured some 70 people. This incident is the latest in a disturbing series of often deadly attacks on prominent leaders of the political opposition and civil society. Like the assault at the August 21 Awami League rally in Dhaka, this incident is an attack on democracy itself.

These continuing acts of political violence underscore the critical importance of solving and preventing such crimes. The failure to bring to justice the perpetrators of these crimes promotes an intimidating climate of insecurity and impunity that encourages further attacks. We urge the Bangladesh Government in the strongest possible terms to identify, arrest, and prosecute those persons responsible for political terrorism.

We extend our deepest condolences to the families and friends of those persons killed and injured in the January 27 attack. We urge all Bangladeshis to exercise maximum restraint and, even in these difficult circumstances, to pursue their political objectives and their search for justice in a peaceful and lawful manner.

Suggested Talking Points for an S-PM Zia telephone call

19. (C) Begin points:

-- One of my first calls as Secretary is to you because I want to share with you my great concern over the January 27 attack.

-- Unfortunately, this attack is only the latest in a series of high-profile attacks on opposition political leaders.

-- I'm concerned that the people responsible for these crimes never get caught. In our view, the investigation of the August 21 was not credible and has therefore encouraged more attacks.

-- I hope the January 27 investigation will be different and provide evidence that your government has the will to solve such crimes.

-- I urge your government to take effective action to halt political terrorism and to start creating now the right climate for a credible and successful general election.

-- The January 27 attack was in an area, Sylhet, which has a history of violence involving political and religious targets. In May, there was the attack that seriously injured the British High Commissioner. Many suspect Islamist extremists are involved in these attacks. To bolster Bangladesh's standing as a tolerant, moderate country, it is important that your government take visible steps to control extremism.

-- I will be calling Sheikh Hasina to condole her on the death of her party members.

THOMAS